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ABSTRACT

This essay considers three areas in Spanish grammar that generally cause difficulty to English-speaking learners: the use of "ser" and "estar," the difference in use between the preterite and imperfect tenses, and the use of the subjunctive. Like most problematic grammatical elements in any language, these points are difficult for non-native speakers to learn, not because of any inherent difficulty but because they operate differently from the native language. So called textbook "rules" of grammar, with many exceptions, are inaccurate and must be replaced by other explanations. Much of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the three problematic areas in Spanish mentioned above, with explanations based on the subconscious norms used by native Spanish speakers. If the goal is to get students to handle a foreign language as nearly as possible like native speakers, the students need to have the same cues for choice that native speakers employ. These cues must be presented on a conscious level, applied in concrete examples and repeated sufficiently for them to become internalized.
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Common Sense in Teaching FL Grammar G.K. Zucker 1

Why is it supposed to be so difficult to learn a foreign lanauage? It certainly can't be due to pronunciation problems, because many people understand and make themselves understood in languages which they speak with foreign accents. Vocabulary may be part of the problem, but the difficulty of acquiring vocabulary in a foreign language often seems a much more formidable problem than it really is. Hearing words used in context a few times leads to those words' becoming a part of one's passive vocabulary at the least.

If the Spanish teachers here were asked to identify specific areas of greatest difficulty, I'm certain that ser and estar, the subjunctive, and the difference between the preterite and imperfect tenses would all rate high priority on their lists. What all of these items have in common is the fact that they all operate differently from any constructions in English.

Constructions which are similar in the two languages need minimal time for explanation and drill because the subconscious linguistic criteria possessed by native speakers of English can be applied to analogous cases in Spanish. Those cases in which English has no direct parallel of the way in which Spanish (or any other language) expresses ideas are the ones which create the greatest difficulty for student and teacher alike.

I remember, as a student, being given lists of "rules" which were supposed to explain some of the "hard" parts of Spanish grammar. After a conscientious effort to memorize those "rules," I found it very frustrating to be informed that there were an extraordinary number of exceptions, each of which, apparently, had to be learned individually.

A little logic will show that these apparent exceptions cannot be exceptions. If they really were, that fact would necessarily restructure the science of statistics, because it would mean that people in different parts of the world have arrived at identical random solutions to the same linguistic phenomena. Frankly, such an explanation sounds implausible.

It would seem more within the realm of probability to contend that the guiding principles, or linguistic criteria, must be different from those that my teachers and textbooks asserted so authoritatively. How, for

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example, can one accept the basic accuracy of the explanation that ser is used to ascribe permanent attributes to its subject, while estar indicates those of a temporary nature? If George Washington is no longer alive, we should then say that he es muerto. Ah, but that case is an exception, to be explained by some metaphysical affinity among native Spanish speakers the world over, because they consider death a temporary state, and consequently say está muerto. Hogwash! What kind of similar metaphysical consideration leads Spanish speakers to consider youth as a permanent attribute, to thus justify that they do, indeed, say es joven of a person, even when that person is due to turn thirty on the following day? Or how, for that matter, do you explain es rico, applied on April 14 to a person who has yet to submit this year's tax returns? Is it reasonable to suppose coincidence in the identical solution of these cases in areas as far apart as a rural village in the Andes and the city of Seville? Of course not! The solution, then, has to be that the permanent-temporary explanation of ser and estar is inaccurate.

Does that mean that it is difficult to learn the difference between the two verbs in usage? I doubt it. On the streets of Guadalajara, or even of Muscatine, Iowa, you will find preschoolers who discriminate correctly between ser and estar. The conclusion drawn from this situation can only be one of the following: either native Spanish speakers have a much higher innate intelligence than native English speakers, or the distinction between ser and estar really isn't difficult. A careful look at specific cases which use ser or estar provides convincing evidence for the latter conclusion.

Textbooks tend to give the impression, both unfortunate and incorrect, that every use of ser or estar is open to choice. The fact is, however, that many cases permit only one of the two verbs. To describe a person's nationality, profession, religious or political preference; to talk about the material of which an object is made or the point of origin of someone or something, or to tell time, all require ser. There is no element of choice. Es peruano, son abogados, es demócrata, la silla es de madera, soy de Nueva York, son

las once y media. Additionally, events are located with ser, used in the sense of tener lugar 'to take place'; e.g., la boda fue en Lima, la fiesta será en mi casa.

Statements of health and the location of entities necessarily use estar. Again, there is no element of choice. Juan está enfermo, el libro está en la mesa, Madrid está en España.

When all of the above matters are eliminated from consideration, the number of cases in which one does have to choose between ser and estar is considerably limited. The problem presents itself, basically, when the verb is followed by an adjective. A study of adjectives reveals that there are two kinds: those which exist independently as adjectives (bueno, rico, bonito, etc.), which we can call "pure" adjectives, and the past participles of verbs, used adjectivally (abierto, cerrado, roto, etc.). Past participles can be further divided into those which are active (chico atrevido) and those which are passive (ventana rota).

For pure adjectives and active participles, ser is used if the attribute is considered the norm for the subject, while estar indicates a quality which is not the norm, or is a change from the norm. This set of criteria is not difficult to teach or to learn.

With passive participles, ser indicates the passive voice (La puerta fue abierta por Juan), while estar describes the state or condition of the subject (La puerta estaba abierta cuando llegué). Here there is a problem in teaching Spanish to native English speakers because, except for the set open-opened, English expresses both ideas with the same words; e.g., the window was broken by the ball, the window was broken when I got here.

Another case which demands some attention is that of the preterite vs. the imperfect. Where English distinguishes four aspects of past action (i.e., I spoke--simple past; I did speak--interrogative or emphatic past; I used to speak--repeated or habitual past action; I was speaking--past action in progress), Spanish only offers two forms; hablé and hablaba. Obviously, Spanish sees no need for means of expressing more than two aspects of past action. However, we cannot conclude that the particular aspects which the Spanish forms

denote are parallel to those of the forms in English.

Again, a successful explanation will seek the subconscious norms which a native Spanish speaker uses to choose a past tense. And, to repeat what was said earlier, these norms are not difficult; they are simply different from the subconscious cues used in English.

Let us begin with the statement that actions have three phases; a beginning, a middle and an end. The basic difference between the preterite and the imperfect is that the preterite is used to express the extremes, either the beginning or the end of a past action, while the imperfect talks about the middle, with no reference to either extreme.

The expressivity of these past tense forms, however, is not as sparse as this brief outline may lead you to believe. The interplay of a couple of factors adds a great deal of richness to what may be said about past actions using only these two forms. Take, for example, the type of action which may be mentioned in the past only as a completed action; one which has no discernable middle, such as romper un vaso or saltar de la ventana. In practical terms, these actions must appear in the preterite: Juan saltó de la ventana. But suppose that John lived on the ground floor of a dormitory and he jumped out his window regularly because that saved him five minutes on the way to his first class. In that case, we express the action in the form which is not normally associated with it; i.e., the imperfect: Juan saltaba de la ventana. The imperfect form gives the perfective action an additional connotation; that of repetition (He used to jump out the window).

In analogous fashion, description in the past is normally associated with the imperfect tense, because when we describe, we are stating the case that was in existence at the time about which we speak. We aren't interested in when the condition began or ended, but only in its being in progress: La casa era verde. Is the house still green? Era verde gives us no clue. If we express the same description, but in the tense not normally associated with it--the preterite--, we again add a connotation. If I say La casa fue verde, we know that it is no longer green; implied is a negation of the

continuation of the described state to the present.

Again, the preterite-imperfect opposition isn't difficult. It's simply different from what English does, and so demands that we look at it from a new angle. The subjunctive is another example of the same problem. Stating that the subjunctive is regularly used after verbs of wishing, wanting, ordering, desiring, verbs of emotion, etc., provides the student with a long list of cues, each of which has four or five exceptions. He might as well try to eat soup with a fork.

Admittedly, the use of the subjunctive is one of the greatest differences between Spanish and English, because English has nearly eliminated it, using in many cases constructions which are so illogical that they must be extremely difficult to teach to nonnative speakers. How can you explain things like him to go, as in I want him to go to blazes? The logical subject of the dependent verb becomes the grammatical indirect object of the independent verb (sometimes preceded by the preposition for), and the dependent verb then becomes the infinitive preceded by the preposition to.

William E. Bull, in his book Spanish for Teachers: Applied Linguistics (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), points out two criteria which cue the subjunctive for the native Spanish speaker, and the logical development of those concepts is not difficult to teach. Once more, linguistic reality is much less complicated than it often seems to our students.

We need, then, to isolate those aspects of the foreign language which create particular problems for native English speakers, and to realize that these points are not so much difficult as they are different from what we are accustomed to in English. After all, if a three-year-old in South America can say Mi mami quiere que vayas al diablo, using the subjunctive perfectly correctly, how hard can it be? It's just that we don't do it the same way in English.

The solution is to approach the teaching and learning of foreign languages not with the attitude that there are going to be some nearly-insurmountable difficulties, but rather with the realization that the language in question is not difficult to learn; there are simply some constructions which are governed by

subconscious linguistic criteria which are different from the cues used in English. To present a list of prescriptive principles is to create an artificial linguistic situation for students. After all, how often do you hesitate in speaking your native language to review mentally a list of "rules" before choosing your next word?

If our goal is to get our students to handle a foreign language as nearly as possible like native speakers, we need to give them the same psychological set that native speakers have. The students need to have at their command the same cues for choice that native speakers employ.

However, when we are dealing with people who already possess the set of criteria which is operable in one language, we can hardly hope that they will intuitively grasp a different, possibly competing set which governs another language. Consequently, we need to explain the new criteria. For help, we can look to the applied linguists, who collect numerous examples of linguistic happenings and analyze what causes them to be the way they are. Those causes are the linguistic criteria possessed subconsciously by native speakers.

Once these standards are explained, they have to be applied in concrete examples, so that the students become familiar with them and, by repetition, internalize them. Now the students have the background necessary to choose a correct construction in any given linguistic situation, because they are operating from the same basis as native speakers.

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